



Pick Your Path to Health

Justice through Healing: a Story about the End of Domestic Violence

By Cathy McCarthy
Anishinaabe - Metis (Non-status)

This is the story of how our communities heal themselves by turning back the pages to a time before Europeans came in and said that their law was the only law. It is a story that is happening today all across Indian Country. It is about men and women and how they are restoring the balance by recalling the natural law that governs all things. It is the story of making natural law the basis of justice through healing.

A man pleads guilty to striking his wife in a circle of his peers and community. He is ashamed but not afraid. His victims are many, his wife, his children, his wife's extended family and friends, his own extended family and friends, everyone in the community. Mitakuye Oyasin - because we are all related.

An Elder stands up to say that this man is out of balance with himself and so is out of balance with everyone and everything. He has a problem with how he feels inside because of things that happened when he was a child. And he has finally begun opening up. The fact is, the Elder says, his problems go all the way back to the time when his ancestors were forced off their land onto this reservation.

A woman stands up to speak on behalf of a family and community team that the man and his wife have asked to help them. She recommends that the man be sent away to a 30-day alcoholism program in the city. But that won't solve the reasons why he drinks and is violent, she says. When he returns, he and his wife and family must participate in a series of workshops on family violence and communication held regularly in the community. And he must continue meeting regularly with the Elders so he can face and defeat his demons by learning his language, his ceremonies, and his cultural heritage. Finally, she says, if he does not re-offend in 6 months, the community will hold a cleansing ceremony and welcome him back as a fully-functioning member.

His wife, and his children stand up and say they love him, they forgive him. They don't want him to go away to jail. But for the next little while, they will

stay with the wife's parents where he can come and visit whenever he wants.

So the man leaves the circle with his dignity, with the love of his family, the concern, respect, and support of his community, and with a plan that he knows will work.

A year later he is home with his family. He has stopped drinking. He uses his words instead of his fists, and he is leading a team working with another member of the community who has beaten his wife and assaulted his children.

The circle is unbroken, the balance restored.

Why is this story so important?

It is being repeated in many ways and with increasing frequency throughout Indian Country and in urban Indian communities. It is recognized by the dominant culture's justice system as a win-win situation for all involved and as an integral part of Native sovereignty.

At a recent U.S. Senate Indian Affairs Committee field hearing in Rapid City, SD, Gregg Bourland, former Chairman of the Cheyenne River Sioux noted that the violence rate of 98 victims for every 1000 Native American women was significantly higher than that of both African American and White women. (Indian Country Today, October 1, 2002). He called upon the Committee to fund community justice through healing circles. He spoke about the White Buffalo Calf Women's Society and their 25-year struggle to bring justice through healing to the women and families of the Rosebud Sioux Reservation. Stories like the one here were told. The Committee responded by funding their program with \$400,000.

Robert Yassie, Chief Justice of the Navajo Nation, calls the story Hozhooji Naat'aanii - "talking things out in a good way". He refers to the Navajo process as "peacemaking" where, "the most important piece of paper is the Kleenex tissue for drying tears."

The Navajo process is probably similar but not the same as all Native justice through healing processes. No one-size-fits all here.

It involves an opening prayer, followed by the expression of the emotional consequences of the misdeed by all who have been affected. An Elder or wise person gives guidance from the stories, traditions, and ceremonies

which apply to the situation. These are drawn from the elements of that natural law that I have already mentioned. Next, all of the parties involved, both victims and wrongdoer, their relatives and friends, discuss and decide how to restore the balance and repair the damage done.

Chief Justice Yassie explains that family participation is an essential part of this healing process because it exposes denial. This exposure is the first step in helping the wrongdoer face reality and take responsibility for his or her actions. Privacy issues don't apply here because the goal is to get at the root causes and fix them. The discussion eventually leads to a plan for restoring good relations between victims and wrongdoer. The plan is only accepted if all gathered are in full agreement.

In many traditions, a person who harms another is said to have acted without respect, as if he or she has no relations. The action is what has upset the natural balance between good and evil, not the person. This helps to focus the solution on what happened and how to restore harmony, not on who did it. If the forces of imbalance are out there, then someone, and probably everyone will fall victim to them one way or another.

This holds especially true in the case of family violence. We as Native women are the ones that have always taken the first steps. We are the ones who led the way to the healing and sentencing circles that are replacing the dominant culture's criminal justice system. This is how it was long ago, and it is just as effective today. It is important to continue building on this role by being an active presence in those systems and in our communities. We cannot rest until the balance dictated by natural law has been restored and family violence is gone from our communities and lives.

Here are some resources that can help you as you take your first steps down the healthy path of eliminating domestic violence from your home and your communities.

Mending the Sacred Hoop

STOP Violence Against Indian Women Technical Assistance Project

202 East Superior Street

Duluth, MN 55802

Phone: 218-722-2781 or 1-888-305-1650

Fax: 218-722-5775

Web site: www.msh-ta.org

Mending the Sacred Hoop is a Native American program whose mission is to assist Native Sovereign Nations to improve their response to women

who are victimized by domestic violence and sexual assault and to restore safety and integrity to them.

Sacred Circle
722 St. Joseph Street
Rapid City, SD 57701
(877)-RED-ROAD (toll free)
Fax: (605) 341-2472

Mission: The mission of Sacred Circle and Cangleska, Inc., is to change individual and institutional beliefs that justify the oppression of Native women. The work to transform tribal families and communities into a circle of balance and harmony requires individual growth and systemic responsibility. Sacred Circle is dedicated to actions that promote the sovereignty and safety of women.

Native American Circle, Ltd.
P.O. Box 227
Elgin, OK 73538
(580) 492-6890
Fax: (580) 492-1890

Mission: We are committed to providing resources and options to rural areas that are predominantly populated by Native people, but we are inter-tribal and interracial in concept. We will not practice discrimination, but endeavor to provide services regardless of race, religion, ethnic or cultural identity. As a result, we do not seek revenue or funding assistance for our programs from any tribe.

Native American Circle's goals are:

- 1) To create a model shelter and substance-abuse treatment program which operate in conjunction with one another to effectively treat the whole person;
- 2) To create training and educational tools and resources that are individually specific to rural Native American communities; and
- 3) To work as an independently-operating source for grant-writing; grant-writing assistance, grant facilitation assistance designed to serve tribes and communities on an individual, customized "needs" basis.

Pick Your Path to Health is a national public health education campaign sponsored by the Office on Women's Health within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. For more information about the campaign, please call 1-800-994-WOMAN or 1-888-220-5446 (TDD), or visit the National Women's Health Information Center at <http://www.4woman.gov/>

To request weekly health tips by e-mail, click on the box that says, "Click Here for weekly health tips by e-mail."